

Playing it Metro

Emma Spruce on 'Playing it Straight' -the dynamics of articulating sexuality in popular culture. Metro-sexuality as a challenge to hyper-masculinity? This article has been published collaboratively by [LSE Equality and Diversity](#) and [LSE Engenderings](#) blog to mark LGBT History Month.

This week saw another Thursday night at home, hiding from the weather and reassuring myself that there wasn't a rule that meant it would stay freezing outside until I touched the snow (at 2am when the doubled-up duvets weren't doing the trick I ended up running into the street to plunge my hand into a drift to see if the pact held; short answer: no). Anyway, there I was, scouring the web for something to watch, when I remembered that a few days earlier a very intelligent American (so less bounded by cultural snobbery than many of us) friend had suggested I look up Channel4's 'Playing it straight' for some mildly traumatising viewing. I'd since forgotten (red wine) and so it was only when serendipity delivered the last episode to my recommended programs that I was drawn in. (let's not dwell about what this means for my viewing habits, I suppose I need to put *Newsnight* on when I'm sleeping to balance things out)

I watched the most recent episode (episode 5) and then, compulsively, watched the majority of those preceding it. Rarely have I felt so emotionally toyed with; I went from guffaws to grimaces in microseconds. My eyes couldn't keep up with the pace and just watered sympathetically throughout. Now, I know what you're thinking, Channel4 has produced some pretty deep stuff over the years. Well, here's the premise; a reality dating show – the fairly familiar format of one woman and eleven men living in a house in Spain and by the end of the series the woman must choose one of the men as her 'date', and there's cash involved. If the title didn't do it, the alarm bells should start to go off when you find out they're living in the 'Hacienda de los hombres', so this is the twist in the tale: some of the men are gay. If the woman (Cara) chooses a straight man at the end they share the cash, but if, heaven forbid, she mistakenly chooses a gay man, he gets to keep the full sum and she doesn't get anything. Shocker.

Eventually I'd taken all I could. I closed the computer screen and burrowed under my duvet(s). Two days later^[1] I inexplicably woke up thinking about the program. What does it *mean* that this program exists? What does it *do* that people watch it? And *why oh why* had I watched multiple episodes of it?

The program appears to 'work' because the group of men all have relatively similar presentations of masculinity. However, rather than gay men that pass as straight, the masculinity on show is a highly coiffured 'metrosexuality'. This results in a fascinating double turn where none of the men can act too straight, because that would indicate that they are 'covering up'- indeed the most 'conventional' men are under suspicion because they are 'too obvious'. I think that's what made this enjoyable viewing. Apart from the occasional moment when the sexuality is less playful (such as being ground up against in a gay bar), the restraints of hegemonic masculinity seem eased and all of the men seem to enjoy being 'forced' to camp it up. When 'outside experts' are asked for their opinion (think men on a gay beach or drag queens) more of the men are judged 'definitely gay' than is statistically possible and poor Cara is left no better informed.

The contenders don't know each other's sexual orientations (nor do we) but because the norm there is not one of hypermasculinity this doesn't result in a 'picking off' of the more 'feminine' men. Instead, even though it is their sexuality and their attempts to convincingly embody heterosexuality that are central features, they seem to revel in the lack of policing of their gendered behaviours. Obviously there is speculation, even attempts to mark each other as gay to reduce the competition, but it's quite universally unconvincing. (Spoiler alert) Once the guy who wears foundation and plucks his eyebrows has been revealed to be straight, mentioning 'feminine traits

as an indicator of homosexuality seems redundant. Cara is resigned to trying to see if anyone is copping an eyeful of each other though even this tactic falls short because of the “double bluff”, of being ‘too straight’. The men remain tactile rather than enforcing personal space in a parody of the homophobic behaviour we are told would occur if men on sports teams came out.

I don’t know if this dislocates the assumption that homosexuality has a necessary relationship with male femininity, but I do think it goes some ways towards disrupting it. I also, and maybe this is the optimist in me, think that the decrease in association between male-ness and aggressive heterosexuality means that there is startlingly little macho posturing, especially in relation to Cara.

Often on this kind of show (yes, it was a recommendation on my playlist remember...its research I tell you...), the dialogue between the men is extremely sexualised and graphic, focusing on the physical attributes or chances of sexual ‘success’ with the woman. It’s not the sort of conversation you have with your brother about people they fancy, it’s the sort of conversation you overhear in ‘rugby corner’ at sports night at the university bar. Individually men don’t seem to think that way, but socially it serves a purpose and can be experienced as positive relationship building (or so I’ve been told). But this program demonstrates, admittedly in a completely bizarre and forced context, that meaningful male relationships can be forged in ways which don’t denigrate women. Excellent.

Before you think the snow has gone to my head, this isn’t a wholehearted endorsement of the show, and I’m not suggesting that we replicate it as a teaching tool in high schools across the country. Whilst I think it *does* good things for heterosexual males, I’m not sure that the gay men come off so well. Essentially their entire purpose there is deception, and it is only through lies that they can succeed. In the first episode this isn’t disturbing, but by the fourth, when emotions come into play (remember, Cara signed up for this at least partly in order to find a date), it did start to make me uncomfortable. If a gay man wins I think the response will be negative and suspicion about gay men, which is well documented within work on sexuality, will be reinforced. It’s also important to mention that the show would feel very different to me if it wasn’t narrated by Alan Carr, a successful ‘out’ gay male comedian (although maybe this in itself is deployed to counter critique?).

So, Sunday procrastination is up and I should return to the coffee-pot of PhD progress. The last episode can be found [here](#) (I imagine you should have a TV license). The gendered lens is everywhere.

[1] To be clear, I did wake up in between. I am, thus far, resisting hibernation.

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